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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes potential benefits of standards-based reform and areas of concern for schools serving American Indian and Alaska Native students. Content standards may benefit Indian education by creating a more common curriculum, providing a focus for improving teaching and learning, and promoting a more holistic, active-learning sort of pedagogy. Various states have sought input from Indian educators about the appropriateness of standards for Indian students or have allowed development of culturally relevant local standards. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of standards will not be realized if the instruction that Indian students receive is inadequate or if the standards are irrelevant to Indian students. Standards-based reform emphasizes testing what is taught. States that use performance-based assessment and multiple measures can avoid or reduce cultural bias in testing. Unfortunately, most states continue to rely on standardized, norm-referenced, or multiple-choice tests, which are thought to be biased. Basing decisions about promotion or graduation on inadequate testing measures may prove extremely harmful to Indian students. Holding schools accountable for students' learning is a plus for Indian education, but students in ineffective schools may also suffer. One recommendation is to base accountability on student and school gains rather than on comparisons with other students and schools. Federal and state governments play a crucial role in helping low-performing schools meet standards. (Contains 12 references.) (SV)

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American Indian/Alaska Native Education and Standards-Based Reform

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ERIC Educational Resources Information Center
DIGEST

Increasingly, schools serving American Indian/Alaska Native students are being affected by state and federal standards-based reform. New content standards delineate more challenging curricula, while new performance standards outline how well students must learn the content, and new assessments measure their learning. But students are not the only ones held accountable. Schools, too, are accountable for student performance. This Digest summarizes both potential benefits of standards-based reform and areas of concern for schools serving Indian students.

Content Standards

The new content standards hold promise for Indian education for several reasons. First, they may help create a more common curriculum among schools within states and clearer learning expectations across states. This could prove helpful to Indian educators in meeting the needs of the many students who transfer between schools. For example, Bureau of Indian Affairs schools have chosen to adopt the content standards of their individual states, thus providing a curriculum that has more in common with nearby public schools. Second, because the content standards drive the curriculum, educators, parents, and students can refer to them to provide increased focus for teaching and learning. Third, new content standards may help improve the quality of instruction for Indian students. The constructivist approach promoted by national and most state content standards allows for a more holistic, real-life, active-learning sort of pedagogy, which is more consistent with traditional American Indian ways of teaching and learning (Estrin & Nelson-Barber, 1995; Fox & LaFontaine, 1995).

The development of new content and performance standards in the various states has also created an opportunity for Indian educators to provide input about their appropriateness for Indian students, although this opportunity has varied from state to state (Fox, 2000). For example, North Dakota and Minnesota reached out to Indian communities for input into standards and outcomes development. Further, some states have allowed for the development of local standards as long as they are as stringent as state-developed standards. In these cases, Indian schools have had the opportunity to develop local standards that infuse Indian cultural and other locally defined outcomes. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has provided a set of Indian content standards for the various academic areas to aid efforts to infuse Indian culture into new standards-based curricula (ORBIS Associates, 1998). Schools can adapt these Indian standards and localize them for their own use. At its best, the development of standards can become a continuous improvement process, seeking input from all stakeholders, influencing state standards, and developing local standards. In many states, however, there has been little or no input into the development or review of standards by Indian people.

Along with the potential benefits come some possible concerns. Educators and parents will need to determine whether or not Indian students are receiving instruction that is aligned with the new standards and rigorous enough to allow students a good shot at reaching the standards. Equally important in states where there was little or no Indian input into the standards, the question of "whose standards are they?," if left unanswered, will hinder progress in schools serving Indian students. In such cases, the standards may, in fact, be inappropriate for American Indian/Alaska Native students (Fox, 2000).

New Assessments

Standards-based reform emphasizes testing what is taught, which entails aligning content standards with new assessments. The development of new standards and tests could be helpful to Indian education, especially in states where the content more closely reflects topics relevant to local students, including Indian students. Some states provide the opportunity for Indian educators to influence the development of statewide tests by checking for appropriateness and eliminating (or at least reducing) any cultural bias (Fox, 2000). Indian educators can further reduce bias by monitoring national tests for items that use terminology foreign to Native students' experiences and suggesting that such items be eliminated.

Standards-based reform can foster less reliance on single tests for decisions about student placement, instead requiring multiple measures, criterion-referenced tests, more performance-based assessments, and accommodations for students with limited proficiency in English. These are major breakthroughs for Indian education. Performance-based assessment, especially, can assist in providing student evaluations that contain less cultural bias (FairTest, 1995), and it is a more culturally acceptable way to evaluate the production of tasks (Bordeaux, 1995). The Bureau of Indian Affairs has implemented the Learning Record, a valid and reliable performance-based assessment system that originated in London, England. Teachers trained in its use demonstrate increased use of research-based teaching strategies. Further, students demonstrate improved attitudes about their ability to learn and parent interest and involvement in their children's education have increased (Fox, 2000).

However, the potential of these improved assessment systems has gone unrealized in many quarters. For example, the fact that most states continue to use multiple-choice tests is a disappointment for Indian education. Standardized, norm-referenced, and multiple-choice tests are thought by some to be culturally biased; if so, Indian students assessed using these tests may be placed at an automatic disadvantage (Bordeaux, 1995). It could be argued that tests that are "normed" based on mainstream student populations and a normal curve will tend, by their very nature, to mismeasure Indian students' learning. Further, research shows that performance on standardized norm-referenced tests is highly correlated with socioeconomic status (FairTest, 1995), and many Indian children live in poverty.

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A report from the Center on Education Policy warns that tests serving "important collective educational goals can sometimes produce negative consequences for individuals" (2001, p. 28). The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment recommends that "the results of a single test should [never] be used to make significant decisions that affect schools or students (2001, p. 11). The use of inadequate testing measures as a basis for decisions about promotion or graduation may prove extremely harmful to Indian students. States that have not involved Indian educators in the development of standards-based assessments are most at risk of mismeasuring Indian student achievement. Another assessment-related concern is that schools might spend too much time preparing students to take standardized tests instead of providing high-quality educational experiences and appropriate diagnostic testing for Indian students (Fox, 2000).

Accountability

The fact that schools will be held accountable for students' learning is a plus for Indian education because Indian people, like other citizens, want their children to learn more. States and districts are required to disaggregate data to ensure that all groups of students are making gains. If the disaggregated data show that students or groups of students are falling behind or making insufficient progress, accountability policies may require schools to be closed, reconstituted, or have funding withheld.

Unfortunately, students in these schools may not be promoted or graduate if they do not score at required levels on the new tests. Some observers recommend that accountability be based on student and school gains, not on direct comparisons with other students and other schools, especially if there is a difference in socioeconomic status or English language proficiency among the students or schools being compared. A recent Department of Education study indicated that students who enter school from high poverty areas, including American Indian reservations, have 3,000-word English vocabularies; their affluent peers enter school with 20,000-word vocabularies (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The students with 20,000-word vocabularies have a much easier time learning the standard curriculum and performing well on standardized achievement tests. Lawsuits have been filed to address unfair testing practices in some states, particularly when students are not allowed to graduate (FairTest, 1999).

Thus far the idea of accountability has been applied primarily to students and schools; however, ultimately all stakeholders must be accountable if standards-based reform is to realize its potential for Indian students. By providing the resources and technical assistance low-performing schools need to reach high standards, federal and state governments play a crucial role. Their efforts will be more effective if they are guided by four recommendations put forward by the Indian Nations At Risk Task Force (1991): (1) Incorporate language and culture to help strengthen students' ability to speak their Native languages and English and to assist in making instruction more relevant; (2) encourage and build community and parental involvement; (3) provide instruction that is appropriate for Indian students, addressing learning styles and student interests; and (4) employ testing that is appropriate for Indian students.

Cornell Pewewardy (1998), writing in *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, states, "All of the restructuring in the world will be of no benefit to children if the philosophy, theory, assumptions, and definitions are flawed or invalid. Indigenous educators and parents know the problems and their causes" (p. 30). Indian educators must have the latitude to try what they think will improve Indian education.

States and schools must make Indian parents aware of school reform and the implications for their children. There must be a greater effort to reach out to Indian parents to explain the school reform process to them and to gain their support if it is to work for Indian students. Indian parents must understand it, be ready to respond to it, participate in it, demand the good parts of it, and protect their children from abuse that might come from it (Fox, 2000).

Conclusion

The standards-based school reform movement in this country provides potential benefits for Indian education and areas of concern. Standards-based reform may provide an impetus to improve Indian education. New standards that promote a holistic approach to teaching and new criterion-referenced and performance-based methods of assessment offer hope. Funding for research and development to create Indian models of school reform can also help make this reform movement meaningful for Indian students. For example, the Department of Education recently awarded a grant to the National Indian School Board Association to create an Indian model of school reform for use with schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Other opportunities may arise. Indian educators, parents, and others who advocate for Indian children, however, must be alert to recognize if standards and assessments are not appropriate for Indian students, if students are unfairly compared, if students do not receive the necessary assistance to reach standards, and if their schools do not receive the necessary financial and technical assistance to improve.

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Sandra Fox recently retired after 24 years in Bureau of Indian Affairs education programs, where her last assignment was coordinating school reform for the schools in that system.

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